
LETTER FROM WYOMING

BOOMTOWN BLUES

How natural gas changed the way of life in Sublette County

BY ALEXANDRA FULLER

The annual Rendezvous Rodeo, held over the second weekend in July, is the largest of the season in Sublette County, Wyoming. Behind the chutes, cowboys were preparing to ride, wrapping old injuries, taping newer ones, stretching their backs, arms, and legs. Redneck scents prevailed: weak beer, dust, manure, diesel, horse sweat, tobacco. The talk was pre-battle jittery and punctuated with barks of laughter. Older cowboys looked on; all of them crooked in the lower back, as if everything south of the rib cage had calcified. Cowgirls waited for the barrel-racing and roping, clutching babies or horses or both, and sporting tight jeans and wind-fire-and-flood-proof hair. A small girl in a cowboy hat galloped into the arena carrying a Stars and Stripes that was larger than the body of her pony. In a high, clear voice, she belted out the national anthem, and everyone who had a hat used it to cover his or her heart.

Then the real business of the rodeo began. I took a seat in the bleachers with the rest of the crowd, most of them family and friends of the participants. The first cowboy up was thrown down hard about three bucks

into a very quick ride. Even from across the arena, you could hear the air leave his lungs, the insult of flesh connecting with the earth. The animal continued to buck, spitting sand up against the rails, until the strap around its belly was released by a pickup man, then it flattened its neck and spun around the arena a couple of times until it found the gate.

Since the unhorsed cowboy didn't look as though he'd be getting up anytime soon, the couple behind me began necking, and the commentator started up with a stash of "my wife" jokes. An ambulance edged between the rows of jeans and plaid shirts that lined the fence, but the commentator sent it back. "I don't think we need the meat wagon," he said. "He's still alive—I saw his toe twitch."

More of nothing happened. The sun was setting. A fire pumped smoke out of the Wind River Mountains, and a brownish bad-l-rim stain crossed the horizon, a result of natural-gas drilling activity on the high plains. "Look at that, folks," the commentator said, by way of diversion. "A real Wyoming sunset!" At last the cowboy

stirred, sat up, was helped to his feet, and hobbled out, waving. A second later, the next chute opened, and a fresh horse broke into the arena, its body already arched in a mean cat jump.

By the time the team ropers were set to ride, midsummer night had descended and the arena was flooded with electric light. Roping is an exquisite art form, but the crowds had already trickled out, and the ropers performed for only a handful of die-hard spectators. Saul Bencomo was on the fourteenth team to ride. A steer bolted into the arena, and Bencomo and his horse spilled after it, his rope moving like a wave of silver water above his head. After twelve beats of the horse's hooves, the loop flowed around the steer's neck. With a quick flick, the loose end of the lariat was around the saddle horn, and Bencomo's horse sat on its haunches. The steer jerked up short, and the picture stalled in a cloud of dust. Next to me, Bencomo's wife, Holly Davis, smiled. "He got it," she said.

Davis is a third-generation cowgirl. Bencomo is a Mexican-Italian vaquero from California. The two work for local ranchers, "letting cows out

in the spring, moving them all summer, digging them out of the willows in the fall, irrigating, cutting hay, vetting animals, fixing fences—working like a dog to stay one step ahead of the next surprise,” as Davis puts it. In between ranch duties, she works as a brand inspector, Bencomo brings in a little prize money from the local rodeos, and both train horses.

“It’s not glamorous,” Davis told me. “It’s a hard life. You’ve got to love it. If you don’t, there’s so much more opportunity in the oil patch or wherever else.” (This part of Wyoming is experiencing a boom in natural-gas exploitation, but locals still refer to the various drilling fields, which spread across the country in patchwork style, as “the oil patch.”) Davis is “one of the greatest cowgirls this county has ever produced,” one resident told me. She is legendary in the area for her toughness; there’s a photograph of her in the rest room of the museum in Big Piney (“Ice Box of the Nation,” population 455). When she told me the story of how she ended up where she is (not far from her parents’ ranch, where she still works), and of how, by contrast, most of the relatives and friends she had as a girl have all ended up where they are (out on the oil patch, out of state, or in Rawlins State Penitentiary), she did so almost in one matter-of-fact breath. In the end, the important difference between Holly and those who gave up ranching for town life or prison life is that most people lack the patience for her line of work. It takes a special passion for solitude and

a special tolerance for slowness to survive here. “Two, three hours, you’re going to move five miles,” Davis said of a cattle drive. “You can’t be out here for long if you don’t know how to be still.”

It was past eleven by the time I left the rodeo grounds, with a few ropers still to ride—midnight cowboys who would have to get home and feed their horses before rising again at dawn. Behind me, the Wind River Range sheared blackly against a moonlit sky and, out in front, the high plains swelled like a great, dark sea. Anchored to the shadowy expanse were half a dozen illuminated drilling rigs that resembled so many Eiffel Towers.



The influx of drilling money has made traditional ranching a less attractive calling.

Sublette County insists on its identity as a ranching community. Pinedale, the county seat, boasts the Cowboy Bar, the Corral Bar and Grill, and Stockman’s Restaurant and Lounge. A historical information board, which stands just outside the asphalt oasis in the desert that is the town of Big Piney, is headlined “Historic Sublette County of Cattle and Men,” and lists the five original settlers of nearby

Piney Creek, in 1878-79. For reasons that are very important (if you are familiar with the difference between raising a high country cow and one bred for southern Texas), the historical board also includes the cryptic sentence “Their cattle were not Longhorns.” But the truth is that if the graph showing the growth of ranching jobs in Sublette County during the past few years were your heart rate, you’d be dead. On the other hand, a graph showing the growth of oil-patch jobs almost does a backflip, it veers upward so steeply. Even steeper is the graph showing recent increases in crime and drug use in the community.

For the first hundred years of its history, Sublette’s freeze-drying winters and long cyclical droughts sent many babies to their graves (accounting for those heartbreaking dates on the scoured markers in the little desert cemetery overlooking the Green River Valley); it was a tough place to settle. Partly because of that, much of the land was incidentally conserved, providing a home for a hundred thousand big-game animals, the largest mule-deer population in the country, the longest big-game migration in the lower forty eights (the pronghorn antelope that summer in Grand Teton National Park make their way back to the desert every winter), and some of the largest tracts of wild lands left in the United States.

Oil and gas booms have been a part of Sublette history—most notably in the nineteen-fifties and again in the eighties (rumor

has it that a sign on the outskirts of Pinedale at the end of that boom read, "Last one to leave turn out the light"), but nothing had quite prepared the county for the current state of affairs. Six or seven years ago, various developments opened Sublette up to a new explosion of mineral extraction. First, a technological advancement in hydraulic fracturing—or "fracing," pronounced "frakking"—allowed natural gas to be extracted from very tight rock. (Tiny particles of sand suspended in a gel are blasted into the rock under extreme pressure, holding it open long enough to allow the gas to escape—a process that shakes the windows of houses as much as a mile away.) Then an administration friendly to oil and gas extraction came into power. Higher energy prices and the subsequent war in Iraq made domestic sources of energy more attractive, and, eventually, Hurricane Katrina closed down many of the gas wells in the Gulf. All these factors led to what one rancher called "an unmitigated frenzy." In the ninety years from 1910 to 1999, just over three thousand wells were drilled in Sublette County. Since 2000, almost eighteen hundred new wells have been added, and seven thousand more have been approved for drilling in the next ten years. Energy companies are pushing for—and will likely get—an energy corridor that would allow them unfettered access to private and public lands in the area, for pipelines and related developments.

In 1916, Congress passed the Stock Raising Homestead Act, which allowed settlers in the Western states to claim a parcel of up to six hundred and forty acres of land—a significant increase over the initial allocation of a hundred and sixty acres—since the arid conditions there were making it impossible for ranchers to survive. The federal government, however, retained mineral rights to the land. According to the Bureau of Land Management, about forty-three per cent of the private land in the state today is federal split estate, meaning that the rancher owns the surface rights but the subsurface mineral rights belong to the government, which may, in turn, lease them to energy companies. Wyoming is one of twelve states to allow companies to take over private land in this way. The state's leaders are almost all pro-energy development. Barbara Cubin, the Republican congresswoman for Wyoming, issued a statement last year arguing that the causes of global warming were still open to debate. In June, she co-sponsored the Deep Ocean Energy Resources Act, a carefully hidden provision of which would oblige federal land-management agencies to act on drilling permits within ten days, or pay a fine to the energy companies for the delay, regardless of the circumstances.

But, even on the lands that are being hurt the most, opposition to the monoculture of the mineral industry is muted. The truth is that no one can turn down the oil companies; the

payoff is simply too high. In 2004, oil and gas companies in Wyoming made twelve billion dollars and returned \$1.7 billion to the region in the form of royalty payments, a massive injection of cash in a state that has a population of roughly half a million. The revenue from drilling justifies, among other things, the lack of state income tax and tax on food, as well as generous scholarships to the University of Wyoming and local community colleges. Wyoming is a "carbontocracy," indebted to minerals for its promise of an easy life, yet strangely impoverished by its own wealth, in much the same way that developing countries can become trapped by the complicated gift of foreign aid.

There is a name for the depression and lawlessness that come with the dubious blessing of mineral wealth: Gillette syndrome. The psychologist ElDean Kohrs coined the term in 1973, popularizing it, a year later, in a paper titled "Social Consequences of Boom Growth in Wyoming," in which he described the ills then being visited upon the coal town of Gillette, Wyoming. A boomtown, he explained, experiences an increase in crime, drug use, violence, and cost of living, and a decrease in just about everything good, except money. (And if it weren't for the new courthouse and the fifty-bed jail in Pinedale, the seventeen-million-dollar aquatic center under construction, and the new hundred-room extended-stay hotel, which has been leased to Halliburton for the next five years, if it weren't

for the grand new roads, built to accommodate oil trucks, or the hundreds of 2006 S. U. V.s on those roads, you'd never know that Sublette County was filthy rich.)

A recent report approved by Ralph Boynton, the Sublette County Attorney, begins, "Reported crimes and arrests have been increasing at an exponential rate since the year 2000 and have been shown to be highly statistically correlated with gas and oil-field activity within Sublette County." The study shows the crime rate rising by thirty per cent from 2004 to 2005, a period when drilling activity increased by fifteen per cent. Air quality and the quality of life in the area have also been affected. Drilling has recently increased in the Wyoming Range and the surrounding foothills, and the steady flow of air traffic (helicopter relays to transport equipment to remote areas), the use of explosives for seismic work, and the constant rumble of trucks carrying helmet-clad men across the desert all reinforce the sense that this boom is, in part, war-related.

With the arrival, since 2000, of nearly three thousand roughnecks (about half of whom are here at any given time), off-rig boredom has begun to hang like a stalled weather system over the county, and boredom explains at least some of the recent upturn in poaching, as well as the startling number of bullet-pocked road signs, the three or four bar brawls every week, and the twenty-odd pickup trucks on the edge of town spinning

doughnuts on gravel roads, clouds of dust stained pink in their taillights. "The violence right now is like nothing I've ever seen in this community before," one night-shift nurse practitioner told me. And in a community this small- Sublette County has a population of around seven thousand, in less than a dozen tiny towns spread out over almost five thousand square miles—even random violence has a personal feel to it. Last spring, a woman was kicked so badly by her friend's husband that she was left with permanently impaired vision and severe facial disfigurement. The perpetrator wrote a letter of apology from jail and posted it in the weekly newspaper, the Pinedale Roundup. "I know that it will be quite a while until things will be halfway normal for you again and I'll pray for your eyesight to return to 100%," his letter said, in part.

Fuelling the atmosphere of restlessness is the growing use of methamphetamine (primarily d-methamphetamine hydrochloride, or crystal meth)—a highly addictive psycho-stimulant, which is the roughneck's drug of choice for two good reasons. "It's available and it's cheap,"

Levi Licking, a thirty-year-old Sublette native and gas-field worker, told me. "Why would you want to spend a hundred bucks on coke and have it last a few hours when the same value of meth will last you two, three days?" And if you run out, I was told, you can always find someone to make more, with a recipe from the Web and ingredients from under the sink.

There is no doubt that methamphetamine had made it into the community before the current boom, but the injection of a large testosterone-heavy workforce, assigned to tough and repetitive work, and the lack of anything else to do in the area have made a small-town problem a big deal. The actual number of people arrested for methamphetamine use in the county is underwhelming: nine in 2004 and forty-three in 2005- unless you keep in mind that the entire population could fit comfortably into a couple of large cruise ships. (In neighboring Teton County, which has almost three times the population of Sublette but no mineral development, the chief of police of Jackson, Dan Zivkovich, told me that methamphetamine incidents are still so sporadic that they don't warrant special notice. "Meth is just not the drug of choice up here," he said.) Detective Sergeant K. C. Lehr, the team commander for the newly appointed Sublette County Drug Task Force, told me last July that he confiscated fifty-eight grams of meth in 2005. "We've already seized over two pounds that's come through Sublette this year," he said. "We're not even touching the surface. There's so much meth coming through this community, it would blow our minds." Jeff Swain, the coordinator of a local mental-health and substance-abuse center, said that the gas boom had increased his workload which is, to a large extent, made up of court-ordered drug- and alcohol-related clients-to the point

where he felt as if he were running a triage unit. "We are, on an ongoing basis, unable to meet the demands of the services requested of us," he said. Intensifying the problem, Swain added, was the schedule of shifts on the patch. Roughnecks are often required to remain unnaturally alert for twelve hours at a time, two weeks in a row, away from friends and family (about seventy-five per cent of the gas-field workers are from outside the region)- a state of affairs that has led people who might not ordinarily be tempted to try meth to use it simply to stay awake. Although drug tests out on the patch are becoming both more rigorous and more frequent, there are almost always ways to get around them. There are stories of people taping clean urine to their legs in condoms, passing urine to each other through truck windows, heating it up in the microwave, or even having one guy provide all the urine for his rig. "To have heard of parents who collect urine from their kids under false pretences (suggesting that it's for the child's medical well-being) so that they can pass their tests is very disturbing to me, but not surprising," Swain said.

Levi Licking and his wife, Becca, live with their two daughters in a pinkish-brown split-level a few miles west of Pinedale and only a few feet from Trappers Point- historic marker indicating the half-mile-wide migration corridor between the Green and the New Fork Rivers, through which several thousand pronghorn

antelope and mule deer pass twice every year, on their way to and from their critical winter grazing land out on the high plains. This stretch of land also serves as a collecting point for the biannual cattle drives that bring the livestock in off the mountains in the fall and set them out again in the spring. The Lickings share their house with a pit bull terrier, a Chihuahua, an enormously fat cat, and a rescued Burmese python. Two roughnecks-old friends who work with Licking on the oil patch-rent space in the basement. (Although the boom has brought jobs to the county, it has also made housing scarce and expensive at least a thousand dollars a month for a trailer. Two five-hundred unit subdivisions are being planned for the edge of town, to absorb furdler growth as well as to alleviate the current housing shortage.)

The house is furnished for people whose most important reference point is the land: rugged carpet, a couple of bottomed-out sofas, a utilitarian coffee table, and a woodstove (which was blazing on the -day that I visited, in early fall- Sublette County regularly registers some of the lowest temperatures in the forty-eight states). On the wall above the python's cage was a framed pencil drawing of Licking at eighteen, in his heyday as a bareback rider. Next to that were several professional photographs of bucking horses ridden by him as a young man, his spurs digging into the horses' flanks, his face hidden behind his cowboy hat, his hand

in the air as if in a black-power salute. On an adjacent wall was a framed newspaper article about a local rodeo, featuring Licking's father with his own cowboy hat tugged down over a weathered, inscrutable face.

"I was pretty much scared of horses, growing up," Licking told me. But when he was twelve or thirteen his father put him on his first full-size bucking horse at the Pinedale rodeo. "I learned to rodeo by being in the rodeo," Licking said. "I could get on a bale of hay and practice spurring it, but other than that I learned to ride right there in front of the crowd. The first time the chute opened, I couldn't hear nothing, I couldn't see nothing. I remember wondering when I was gonna hit the ground, then I hit the ground, and I knew because it hurt like hell." Licking paused now and grasped his wrist, where the bucking strap would have been wrapped. "I was totally hooked."

By the time he was a senior, in 1995, Licking was seventh in the nation in high-school rodeo and one year into a meth habit that would last a decade. "When I first did meth, I did it for a week straight," he told me. "I was up for at least five, six days. I came down, I went to sleep for the night, I woke up, and I didn't have the nervous shakes, the jitters. So I thought, You know, they all lied to me-addiction is a bunch of bullshit. I didn't feel addicted; I just felt like I wanted some more meth." But one evening, that summer of his senior year, Licking was

strapping on his spurs at a rodeo in the town of Jackson when the ground curled up and hit him so fast that he didn't see it coming. He had been awake for a week straight, snorting meth as often as he felt himself coming down, but his body had finally shorted. He picked himself up, got on his ride, and won the rodeo. Even so, he realized that he had to give up either horses or meth. It was Licking's last rodeo.

By the time the cops caught up with him, two years ago (Licking had stolen two motorcycles, which he was planning to trade for meth in the city of Rock Springs), ten years of drug use had eaten at his frame. "He looked like just a white grayish sheet of skin draped over a skeleton-- he was horrible," Becca said. Licking agreed. "It's most mighty hard on your body. But it affects different people in different ways. The worst symptoms are the things they can't show you on a poster. I am a strong believer in you go to work, you don't beat on your family, you come home every night. And, you know, I lost those values when I was really, really messed up on meth. I lost all my self-respect- I didn't give a shit what anybody thought about me."

In a way, the oil boom saved Licking. It gave him a job near home and the stabilizing influence of Becca, whom he married at twenty-one, and who is all pre-Raphaelite curves and has an unflappable maternal way about her that enables her to keep her husband and his roughneck friends in line. In practice, this means muddy

boots off at the carpet; cussing to the edges of the conversation; smoking to the edges of the room; drinking within reason; and no meth in the house. "No way, no how," she said. "I've been in that hell with Levi. Been there, done that. No more."

For his part, Licking was grateful to be alive, he told me, and for the work, even though the hours are long and the conditions brutal. "You've got the people who don't like the oil field but like the money," he told me. (A roughneck can make as much as sixty thousand dollars a year, a substantial step up from the minimum wage and a kick in the teeth that a cowboy can expect.) "But I think they forget what it was like before the oil field. I grew up with my dad gone all the time, because there was no work here and he was out of town." He cracked his knuckles, and his voice dropped. "You leave a kid out here to figure it out for himself, and he's got a lot of room to mess up, and that's gonna include addiction to meth. The old local crowd that I ran with are pretty much done. They're either in prison or went somewhere else." Licking counts himself as one of three out of twenty of his friends who made it off meth.

He said that the real problem with meth use on the rig is the potential for accidents provoked by meth users operating recklessly. "A couple of weeks ago, I showed up on a rig and I got out of my truck and looked at the roughnecks that were there and they were fucked up-I mean big time, just going

jammin', crammin', I walked over, got in my truck, called my supervisor, and I told him, 'Look, I don't think it's safe to work here.' The old boy thought he could run the situation and keep everybody safe, and the forklift operator dropped a pipe on the guy's foot and broke it and whatnot-yet the guy that got his foot dropped on had three grams of meth in his pocket, so he got in trouble and went to jail."

One of the basement roughnecks--a handsome man, with a shaved head, a sunburned neck, and intense blue eyes, nicknamed the Kid--came and sat with us while we talked. He wore jeans and a T-shirt over long underwear; the edge of a tattoo was visible on the back of his neck--a mixture of small-town rebel and old-fashioned cowboy manners. The Kid's family is from Sublette, and when he first left school he found work breaking colts on a ranch up North. "Sixty bucks a head, I could turn out five colts a week," he said. "I thought I was gonna be out there and no one was gonna know or care. I took a job on the rigs as soon as I could. At least they pay you for risking your life. I'll work this boom the rest of my life," he predicted.

Licking and the Kid both told me that there is no real incentive for the bosses on the rigs to clean up the drug use. "If they did, they'd have no one left working," the Kid said, and, anyway, he added, meth just comes with the roughneck culture, so why panic now? "Meth has been part of my life since I was a child. All my life

I've had to deal with it, whether it be roughnecks, my family, or my friends. I've watched people like Levi do stupid shit, and I've done my share of stupid stuff" The Kid went on, "We're big people--we don't need cops to babysit us." He looked at me as if I had the answer. Then he came up with a solution for himself "The only way you're gonna stop the meth addiction here is they've got to introduce something else. In order to get a little, they gotta give a little. It's kinda hard to convince the roughnecks--someone that makes a bunch a money, that's gonna be away from his family and his wife for a week at a time, that's with another bunch of bored roughnecks--it's hard to convince them not to want to have fun. The only way I can see for putting a dent in the meth is something like a titty bar--you know, like a Hooters. What else do you see working?"

On the Jonah field--a natural-gas field south of Pinedale--the Canada-based company EnCana has the majority of leases, approximately five hundred wells over about twenty-three thousand acres. (The Bureau of Land Management has just approved the drilling of an additional thirty-one hundred wells in this area alone.) The high plains have a way of diminishing and distorting the scale of everything, and, until you're climbing the stairs to the doghouse on a drilling rig in the Jonah field, it's difficult to imagine the height of the rig or the sense of exposure out here; it's as if the tower were anchored to a swell of water

that might shift at any moment and set you adrift. On the day that I visited, a stiff; hot breeze rising up off the ground caught the rig's flag in a whiplash, and EnCana's spokesman, Paul Ulrich, and I had to raise our voices to be heard. When we opened the door to the doghouse (where the operations for the rig--computers, telephone, and coffeemaker--were sheltered), the most overwhelming sound was that of the drill bit barking as it wound its way deep into the earth. Four young men, uniformed and serious, manned the rig. The atmosphere was one of grim efficiency. Notices warned that drug and alcohol use would not be tolerated. The only hint of any lightheartedness was a seemingly official sign that quipped, "Sexual harassment will not be tolerated. But it will be 'graded.'"

A similarly serious atmosphere prevailed at the EnCana "man camps"--employee dormitories--which were laid out in a sterile section of land on the other side of the highway. The beds had clean sheets; the garbage cans were emptied; everything was designed to be temporary, anonymous, and easily wiped down with a mop. In the main section of the camp, a cafeteria offered sandwiches, brownies, cookies, juice, and milk. A huge television screen dominated a game room. There was nothing to suggest drugs or alcohol. There was hardly even anything to suggest men.

Ulrich, who served in the Navy during the first Iraq war, was square-jawed and handsome,

with a serviceman's sense of discipline and an old warrior's outlook on life. "Eight hundred people work here on behalf of EnCana," he said. "And anyone working for us--anyone at all--they're subject to our drug policies. These young individuals are out there doing dangerous work in all weathers, twenty-four hours a day--it's just blistering in the summer, and forty degrees below with a wind chill you wouldn't believe in the winter. We owe them a drug-free environment. If we have an incident, everyone is tested for drugs and alcohol on the spot. If there's paraphernalia, we lock down the rig and test everyone on sight. There's no drugs and alcohol allowed in the man camps, either. Lights out at ten o'clock."

Still, Ralph Boynton, the county attorney--a man whose booming, confident delivery suggests that he is used to addressing a jury that isn't allowed to answer back--says that although the energy companies may be trying to cooperate with law enforcement the oil patch is fuelling crime and the use of meth in the community. "Pounds of methamphetamine are coming in the oil patch every week," he said. "And, you know, people are crafty and they're cagey, and if they see an employer they're gonna hightail it, get rid of the stuff. But people say you can get methamphetamine anywhere you want on the oil patch, and drug interdiction becomes difficult, because there's a loyalty among the drug users. On two occasions, I've heard that there was a drug

check to be performed the next morning-word was leaked, and all of a sudden everything was squeaky clean."

"If you fail a piss test, you're not going to work out on the Jonah field, "I was told by a local ex-dealer, who had been caught manufacturing meth. "But there are other rigs that'll hire you. I know three or four drillers, and everyone on their crew is high, but they get shit done and they don't care. If it gets out that the cops are going to show up, they shut the rig down and say, 'Everyone go home.' That way, they don't have to take a piss test and fire everyone, and they can all go back to work the next week."

While the social problems of the boom are being, by turns, policed or ignored, the environmental consequences of the drilling are taking effect with such speed that even the watchdog groups have a hard time keeping track. The high desert of Sublette County has an unforgiving geological memory. The inland sea of fifty million years ago is suggested by pink-and-white layered dunes. Old-growth sagebrush and pronghorn antelope have evolved over thousands of years to live with thin moisture and cremating winds. The flinty soil that accounts for those tinny hoofbeats in old Westerns crumbles under the weight of anything heavier than a soft-footed coyote. Such landscape is easily scarred-you can still see the wagon ruts from the Oregon Trail-which makes the hasty real-estate developments and fifth-wheel-trailer parks that have spread in latter years

stand out with more than ordinary ugliness.

Solid proof of environmental degradation takes time to accumulate (officially, oil-company spokespeople speak of "changes" rather than of "degradation," and point to the pronghorn grazing on reclaimed land next to the rigs as anecdotal evidence that their environmental policies are adequate), but almost everyone, including many in the industry, will tell you, off the record, that the environmental damage is likely to be irreversible. "Make the wrong mark and you'll be looking at your mistake for a long, long time," Holly Davis told me in mid-September, when I joined her and Saul Bencomo on a cattle drive for a rancher named Freddie Botur. "Your grandkids and great-grandkids will be looking at your mistake. You'll be remembered for the mess you left."

What has been, indisputably upset by the boom is the careful balance of ranching, drilling, and tourism that the community had maintained for almost a hundred years. Winter had traditionally brought a kind of sacred silence to the region, as the tourists went home, the rigs shut down, and the ranchers tucked in for the duration. Now drilling continues year-round, day and night, even on lands that Wyoming Game and Fish has set aside as critical winter habitats. Until recently, the people who lived here had to pay attention to the land and to the weather, to the cycle of the seasons and to their neighbors, in order to survive. There was a

sort of forced meditation as a rancher waited for his hay to ripen, or dealt with the round-the-clock task of keeping calves alive in an April blizzard. Now minerals are being extracted at such a rate that there is no time or tolerance for contemplation or debate.

Botur's ranch falls roughly in the middle of Sublette County, and it is a place of surprising fertility, as if the dry plains had decided to make up for the miles of sage with a sudden valley of springs and cottonwood tree~ kind of penance in a high basin of dust and forest-fire smoke. But, when I arrived for the cattle drive, earth near the entrance to the ranch had recently been moved to make way for a rig-for a company that had leased the subsurface rights from the federal government. "Energy is the dominant culture now," Botur told me. "We're getting steamrolled by industry. And there's no leadership, no desire, on the part of the federal government to slow it down." A place in the throes of an energy boom isn't so different from a person in the throes of addiction: there's the denial that things are out of control; there's the sleeplessness and the moral carelessness, and the fact that you're doing something that you know isn't good for you but you just can't stop. "They're going after everything," Botur said. "The impact on this kind of land, with our slow growing season and thin soils, is essentially irreparable." Each well takes up about three acres of land, but that doesn't include the incidental development of

roads, water treatment facilities, pipelines, and housing for rig workers. In the past six years, requirements for rig spacing have been downsized from eighty acres to as few as ten, which means that parts of the plains are now entirely given over to gas development. Since 2000, there has been a forty-six-per-cent decline in mule-deer populations. "I give the government an F -minus for the way they've handled this situation," Botur added.

"They've ripped the roots out of the very thing they say they care about: community values, family values, property rights. The way I look at it, the whole soul of a place .has been torn out, and for what? You don't put a soul back into a place once it's gone."

By midmorning, an hour and a half into the cattle drive, Davis, Bencomo, Botur, and I had moved twelve hundred head of came a couple of miles. Botur rode ahead with his dog, Miso, to manage the lead; Bencomo and Davis kept the middle of the drive moving with their dog, Lizzy, and I was left to do what I could at the back. Lizzy worked the hills, bringing down stray cows, her tongue bleeding where she'd caught it on brush. It had been below freezing when we set out along willow bottoms, moving the complaining came slowly toward the ranch pastures. By midday, it was seventy degrees, and a dry wind had sucked the moisture from our faces. The drive funneled up a gulch and onto a county road. Davis and Bencomo rode the steep slopes with an instinct for badger holes

and sagebrush, pressing the cows up and over the rise with increasing urgency.

As I crested the rim with the last of the cattle, I could see the body of the drive a mile away, meandering over flax-yellow pasture. Botur was already out of sight. Bencomo and Davis were debating the merits of going back for a stray now or later, and what, if anything, to do about Lizzy's tongue (she seemed oblivious to her wound). For a moment, I felt as if it were 1906. And then, in the distance, the thundering of an oil truck on the gravel road intruded. Although the truck slowed before it reached us, the startled cattle veered off in separate panic-stricken threads. It takes momentum and patience to form cattle into a steady river of movement, and a weary herd can seem even more stupid than a rested one; now the confused cows milled by the side of the road, started lime cattle drives of their own, or turned and headed back for the pasture we'd just removed them from. Lizzy panted up at Bencomo. "Now what?" she seemed to be saying.